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Hollywood Takes “The Express” to Mooseheart

On most days, Mooseheart Child City and School is the picture of tranquility. But on Friday, all that will change, as the quiet little campus will get a visit from Hollywood.

Film crews will begin setting up then to shoot several scenes for a movie called “The Express,” which will tell the story of Ernie Davis, the first black college football player to win the Heisman Trophy.

The film stars Rob Brown (“Finding Forrester,” “Coach Carter”) as Davis and Denis Quaid as Syracuse University coach Ben Schwartzwalder, who guided Davis to his trophy.

Mooseheart will stand in for upstate New York in the 1950’s for scenes depicting Davis’ high school years, and producers have chosen the school’s football stadium; the Pennsylvania Home, a boarding house for Mooseheart students; and a gravel road near the north end of the grounds as backdrops for their shots.

While Brown will likely be on set, Quaid will not because the locally shot scenes will depict Davis’ high school years in Elmira, NY, according to Mooseheart spokesman Kurt Wehrmeister.

“It’s a neat opportunity for Mooseheart to be a part of that,” said Scott Hart, director. “How often does Hollywood come to Mooseheart?”

He’s right – it doesn’t happen that often. Mooseheart was last visited by the movie biz in 1989, when several scenes of the Gene Hackman thriller “The Package” were shot there. Parts of “Coach of the Year,” a 1980 TV movie starring Robert Conrad, also were filmed at Mooseheart.

Wehrmeister said movie producers have expressed interest in Mooseheart roughly half a dozen times in his 15 years with the organization. He said they most likely hear about the Child City through the Illinois Film Office, a division of the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity.

That office keeps a library of thousands of potential movie sites in Illinois, according to spokesman Mica Matsoff. She said the office has a team of location specialists who

scout new sites all the time, and when producers and directors show an interest, the office acts as a liaison, guiding them on tours of the locations.

Matsoff said interest in Illinois locations is broad and fairly constant. “I think it’s across the board,” she said. “That’s one of the great things about Illinois – we have residential, we have big cities, coal mines, railroad tracks, all different landscapes.”

Crews will set up at Mooseheart starting Friday, with scouting scheduled to begin Wednesday. All scenes are expected to be completed by the following Friday.

Wehrmeister does not expect the filming to disrupt classes during the week, but he said any activity after 3:30pm “will probably have curious students in the vicinities.”

“The Express” is based on Robert Gallagher’s book “Ernie Davis, The Elmira Express: The Story of a Heisman Trophy Winner.” The film will be directed by Gary Fleder, who helmed “The Runaway Jury” and “Things to Do in Denver When You’re Dead.”

Davis attended Elmira Free Academy in the 1950s and was named player of the year and a high school All-American in both his junior and senior years. At a time when black athletes did not get many scholarship offers, Davis received more than 50, and he chose to attend Syracuse University.

While there, Davis led his team to the national championship and was named Most Valuable Player in both the Cotton Bowl and the Liberty Bowl. After the 1961 season, his senior year, Davis won the Heisman Trophy, and was the No. 1 pick in the 1962 NFL Draft, going to the Washington Redskins, who then traded him to the Cleveland Browns.

Davis succumbed to leukemia in 1963 before he ever played a down of professional football. After his death, the Browns retired his number, 44, and Davis was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1979.